Professor Takes Art to the Streets
by Janette Ballard

Conor McGarrigle, assistant professor in the emergent digital practices program, took to the streets of Denver on April 11 to draw a 26.2 mile line along Colfax Avenue that was then captured in a satellite photograph. This was the latest performance by the new media artist and researcher whose work examines the ways that digital technologies are integrated into everyday life.

“While talk of the digital revolution may be something of a cliché, we are nonetheless living through an accelerated pace of change to the point where thinking of a world without digital technology is almost unimaginable,” McGarrigle said. “My work reflects on these changes, examining the ways technology is now part of all aspects of our lives.”

McGarrigle walked the entire length of Colfax in just under nine hours, beginning on the eastern plains, winding his way through the heart of downtown and finishing on the west side. He pushed a line-marking device along the route, creating one of the largest drawings ever made. The line was then captured in a commissioned high-resolution satellite photograph.

He intermittently posted his location on twitter and encouraged locals to join him for part of his walk to discuss the project, share their Colfax experiences and help him uncover the stories, connections and associations that transform city streets into neighborhoods.

“The very act of walking in the city has become a marginalized practice in many American cities yet by walking we can experience the city itself, at a human pace, as a space of discovery and encounter,” he said.

The project has personal resonance for the artist, a recent immigrant from Ireland to Denver. “It symbolically re-enacts the historical migrants’ westerly journey along a street named for Schuyler Colfax, the 17th Vice President of the United States, who made his name opposing Irish immigration in the nineteenth century,” said McGarrigle. “After leaving office, Colfax traveled through the west and wrote about Denver. He died after walking a mile in sub-zero temperatures.”

McGarrigle is interested in getting art out of galleries and creating work that can be experienced on the street, and says technology provides a means to achieve this. His most recent project reflects his interest in location-awareness, the fact that we carry mobile devices that know and report our position constantly.

“Location-awareness combined with ubiquitous network access is changing how we experience urban space in subtle and interesting ways. I believe there is much to be gained from exploring
these shifts in our perceptions of space,” he said. “My recent work takes as its starting point the fact that networks have become so entangled in everything we do that we now live in what has been called 'hybrid space', that is a space where physical space and virtual space are inseparable.”

McGarrigle was raised in Dublin and pursued an education in both the arts and sciences. Originally trained as a scientist, he received an MFA from the National College of Art & Design, and a PhD from the Dublin Institute of Technology. McGarrigle joined DU in 2012 and teaches classes on systems, making networks and networked art and digital art history.

“For me the most rewarding part of teaching is when students begin to make connections between the different strands of the program and start to employ the skills and techniques that they've acquired to make their own work,” said McGarrigle. “That's the point that their individual voice begins to emerge and I begin to see the pieces fall into place for their future creative careers.”